

► If Everyone Else Is Doing It, Should We Do It Too?

Using Social Media for Organizational Learning and Development

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Open up any Training and Development magazine and somewhere you will see a reference to social media. You're probably being invited to webinars on the topic of incorporating web 2.0 applications into talent planning. Most HR conferences such as ASTD, The Conference Board, SHRM, and HRPS, now feature at least one presentation on L&D in a 2.0 world. It seems like everyone is using social media as part of their organization's talent management planning. But just because everyone else is doing it, does that mean you should incorporate social media into your interpersonal skill development agenda too?

Trying to stay on the forefront of this technological shift in development practice is challenging. There are limited case studies showing the ROI from social media programs and while many organizations are sharing what they are doing with social media, there is little detail provided on how they are doing it. There has not been sufficient time to allow a fair evaluation on the true value of social media to drive organizational behavior change. In every conversation on the topic, the pros and cons of social media naturally surface. There are a few issues that tend to emerge in the debate, as can be seen in the below sample of a typical hallway conversation on the social media topic:

Eager Ed – Loads of people in our organization have a Twitter account, Facebook page, and visit YouTube. It would be easy to incorporate this technology into our L&D efforts. If we don't get on board then we are going to miss the train and be seen as an "old school" organization. It is a very creative way to encourage learners to share stories and best practices—it could increase uptake in our L&D offerings! And many of these applications are free to use, so the cost is really minimal. I was thinking we could use the tools after learners go through web-based training courses as a way to connect a training group. I've also read that you can use discussion boards as part of skill building after learning, so let's...

Cautious Chris – Hang on there! I agree that for a lot of our global programs it would be good to provide a place for our learners to network and share application stories but that shouldn't be on Facebook or Twitter. Maybe we could use discussion boards or create a special part on our intranet site for them to build and share bios. Aligning it to training sessions is good but I think we should dip our toe in the water first. And while there's no expense for many of the sites to be set up, what about the ongoing maintenance costs? It's more than IT department time—we would need an administrator for many of the applications you mentioned. If we had a discussion board then we must have a monitor checking how the questions are being answered, or with a wiki, ensuring any information posted is accurate and valuable for the other users. It's a more significant investment than you are thinking.

Eager Ed – Surely if we share some guidelines on what to add, or what not to add, then the learners can adhere to that. Maybe our marketing department has a policy that we can use for the rules? I recognize that we might need to dedicate someone as an administrator for the site but that's a small cost for thousands of associates having sustainable L&D.

Cautious Chris – Thousands of associates? You're assuming that everyone will actually use these applications. I am worried about whether some of our more senior associates will embrace this change in training strategy. I can already hear them saying that if formal learning is not broken then why are we trying to fix it? Like you said, many of our learners use these applications now, but not all of them. I like the idea of using podcasts, but they take a while to script and record, they require good technology so the sound is of high quality, and we could do all that for no-one to listen to them!

Eager Ed – Good point. Like you said earlier, perhaps we need to take it slow. We could use podcasts as part of post-work for learners to complete after a workshop. Maybe they have to pair up with someone and role-play or create an example of what not to do. We could put them onto our HR homepage and run a competition for the best one, which would make people complete the assignment. You know how competitive they are.

Cautious Chris – Yes, that could work, especially if we add this social media stuff onto existing programs like our orientation or leadership development series. But I would need to check whether learners can upload documents or videos to that homepage. It is part of the new LMS so there are certain levels of contribution to the site that we're limited to and the IT team is still working on that now.

Eager Ed – Oh, I forgot we had that new LMS in place. Let's see what the IT team can do to help us make this really easy to use. Life before LMS seemed much easier.

Cautious Chris – And that's a good point right there. With all this social media technology we can expect a turnover of the now-favorite applications. While podcasts might seem hot today, they may be replaced by vodcasts or something else tomorrow. I know we want to appear at the forefront of technology, but if we do go with social media as a way for driving organizational development then we're going to need to be prepared for other web 2.0 advances.

Eager Ed – That's what makes it so exciting!

And the debate continues. A familiar conversation perhaps? Either among HR team members, or just some of the considerations you may have listed in your head.

So, this brings us back to the original question that is percolating: Should you incorporate social media into your L&D agenda for interpersonal skills? We have seen that it is not such a simple question. In fact it is made up of several pieces and parts, both technology and culture based. To help you, below is a checklist of things to consider before adopting the social media initiative:

- Is there demand in our organization for informal and social learning?
- How comfortable are our associates at using technology for L&D purposes?
- What technology do we already have that could be leveraged?
- Does our organization have an established policy on what associates can and cannot upload onto intranet and Internet sites?
- Do we have a short-list of which social media tools we might try?
- Is there budget and administrator support to try a small "taste test" before we consider launching on a larger scale?
- Are there stand-alone HR initiatives that we can try maximizing with social media applications to measure success?
- What problem are we trying to fix, and how will we measure to know its improvement?

If you cannot answer some of these questions, then that's your starting point! Explore with your IT department what technology already exists in your organization, such as Microsoft SharePoint, which could be extended to include blogs or discussion board components. Consider sending a survey to associates across various departments and various generations to explore their thoughts on social media.

Finally, when you're reading the next social media article or listening in on a "Learning 2.0" webinar, assess the success of the social media implementations. Social media is easy to set up and advertise, but like all HR programs it requires dedicated planning and alignment of your current initiatives. While it might seem as if everyone else is doing it, ask yourself: Are they doing it well?

About the Authors



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